



SUMMER/FALL 2004

UPDATE

LOCAL WORKING GROUP TIMELINE

Dillon, Miles City, Glasgow

Dec 2003 - Jan 2004

LWGs launched with first round of meetings

Feb-March 2004

2nd round of meetings,
biologists' presentations

April 2004

3rd round of meetings

June 2004

4th round of meetings, field trips

Late Summer/Fall 2004

5th and 6th round of meetings
(See page 3 for dates and locations)

Winter-Spring 2005

7th and 8th round of meetings

March 2005

Local Working Group
action plans completed

Anyone interested is welcome
to join this effort at any time.

For details about the LWG project, go to:
<http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/groups.asp>

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS?

If you have any questions or comments
about the LWGs or this newsletter, please
contact Anne Cossitt, Cossitt Consulting

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Local Working Groups Address Key Issues

At meetings held in April and June at each local working group location—Dillon, Glasgow, and Miles City—participants held in-depth discussions of conservation actions for sage grouse and sagebrush habitat.

The Montana state plan for sage grouse conservation (see state plan update inside this newsletter) identifies a tool kit of conservation actions for 12 different issues that have potential impacts on sage grouse habitat and populations. The local working groups have begun to address these issues:

- Noxious Weed Management in Dillon, Glasgow, and Miles City
- Power Lines and General

Facilities in Dillon and Miles City

- Vegetation in Dillon, Glasgow, and Miles City
- Fire Management in Glasgow

Each local working group held a field trip in conjunction with the June meeting, to identify seasonal sage grouse habitats and assess habitat condition using the standardized methodology in the state plan. Habitat conditions varied greatly, not only among the three working group locations but also among specific sites. Participants on each field trip noted the effects of Montana's continuing drought and other site-specific conditions.

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Dillon Field Trip, June 2004

photo by Rick Northrup, FWP

Funds Available For Habitat

Several programs currently being developed or already underway offer financial incentives to private landowners for improving sage grouse habitat. Such habitat improvements can benefit livestock production as well as sage grouse and other wild species (see “Deseret” box). State programs can partner with federal programs, which greatly reduces the overall cost to landowners.

Administered by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Landowners interested in more information are invited to call the nearest FWP regional office:

Bozeman, 406-994-4042
Great Falls, 406-454-5840
Billings, 406-247-2940
Glasgow, 406-228-3700
Miles City, 406-232-0900

- Habitat Montana Program, including conservation and enhancement of sage grouse habitat through long-term leases and conservation easements (in 1999-2000 this program generated \$5.6M funding).
- Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program, including grazing management agreements with private landowners and projects to reestablish native vegetation (more than \$5M in dedicated funds have been used in this program thus far).

Deseret Livestock Firm Reports Multiple Benefits From Grazing Management

In response to interest expressed at a previous Dillon local working group meeting, the Bureau of Land Management sponsored a presentation by the Deseret Land and Livestock Company at the Dillon meeting in June. Rick Danvir, biologist for the northeastern Utah company, reported that by managing grazing to more closely mimic grazing by native animals, the ranch was able to increase herd size as well as wildlife populations between 1983 and 2000.

Danvir discussed the sagebrush treatment methods used on the ranch to promote forage and understory in areas of dense sagebrush, to obtain a mosaic and avoid large contiguous areas without sagebrush. When asked what had made the biggest difference over time — grazing management or sagebrush treatment — Danvir responded that if a ranch can do only one or the other, managing grazing is the more cost-effective approach.

- Montana Sagebrush Initiative provides incentive payments for maintaining sagebrush on private lands.

Administered by Natural Resources Conservation Service

Details on NRCS programs may be found at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmland/2002 or by contacting your local NRCS office.

- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), including funding development of grazing systems intended to enhance biodiversity and to improve ground cover for ground-nesting birds such as sage grouse.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), including technical and financial assistance for development of

grazing systems to improve native grasslands and shrublands.

- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Conservation Security Program (CSP). Various aspects of these programs may be applied to sage grouse habitat.

Administered by Bureau of Land Management

Contact the Bureau of Land Management for more information on the following program.

- Prairie/Sage Conservation Initiative, including programs for sage grouse surveys and habitat evaluations.

Key Issues, continued from page 1

By March 2005, all three of the groups will have discussed each of the 12 topics and dedicated time to those determined to be relevant for their area of the state. The remaining topics include:

- Sage Grouse Harvest Management

- Livestock Grazing Management
- Mining and Energy Development
- Outreach, Education, and Implementation
- Predation
- Recreational Disturbance

- Roads and Motorized Vehicles
- Other Wildlife

For summaries of all local working group meetings, go to the website: <http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/groups.asp>.



Photo © Montana FWP

Sage Grouse Assessment Released

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has completed its detailed assessment of sage grouse. Containing a wealth of information about sage grouse biology, habitat assessment, and other material, the 610-page document is available on the internet at <http://sagegrouse.wafwa.org/>.

This document will be reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the agency's status review of sage grouse.

FWS Listing Update

In April, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced its "90-Day Finding" on the petitions to list sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. According to law, FWS has 90 days to make a finding as to whether petitions have sufficient biological information to indicate that listing may be warranted.

In its 90-Day Finding, the FWS stated that it had determined that substantial biological information exists to warrant a more in-depth examination of the status of greater sage grouse. This finding will commence with a full status review of the species, and once the review is complete, the FWS will determine whether to propose listing the species as either threatened or endangered. The final review should be completed by January 2005.

If you plan to attend the next sage grouse LWG meeting:

- Please take time to read the portions of Section VI (Conservation Actions) of the Montana state plan that relate to the topics for the next meeting in your area (Dillon: Roads and Motorized Vehicles, Recreational Disturbance, Glasgow: Livestock Grazing Management, Miles City: Livestock Grazing Management).
- To access the plan through the Internet, go to this website: <http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/projects.asp>. From that page, you can access a "pdf" file of the plan. If you do not have Internet access, you can request a copy of the plan from your nearest Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks office.
- If you've missed a meeting or meetings, plan on coming to the meeting at 2:30 p.m. for updates and questions-answers on what's already been discussed.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

DILLON

Wednesday, September 15, Search and Rescue Building

- 2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topics: Roads and Motorized Vehicles, Recreational Disturbance.

Wednesday, October 13, Search and Rescue Building

- 2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topics to be determined.

GLASGOW

Wednesday, September 1, Cottonwood Inn

- 2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topic: Livestock Grazing Management.

Wednesday, October 6, Cottonwood Inn

- 2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topics to be determined.

MILES CITY

Monday, August 30, Miles Community College, Room 317

- 2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topic: Livestock Grazing Management.

Monday, October 4, Miles Community College, Community Room

- 2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topics to be determined.

Montana Local Working Group participants requested that a letter be sent to the FWS with an update of their work. A draft letter was prepared and posted on the Local Working Group website in June. A final letter was prepared, incorporating comments from Local Working Group participants, and sent to the FWS on June 29. The letter is available at:

www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/june29letter.co

For updates on activities pertaining to sage grouse listing and information on the listing process go to: <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/sagegrouse/>. (If you want this information and you don't have Internet access, please call Anne Cossitt, Cossitt Consulting, Park City, Montana, 406-633-2213.)

Montana State Plan Update

The Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana was developed with participation from a broad range of stakeholders including state agencies, federal agencies, tribes, conservation organizations, agricultural organizations, and private landowners. The plan incorporated public comment at several stages in the process, and a draft version was released for public comment in December 2002.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) issued an Environmental Assessment (EA) and revised “Final Draft Plan” in March 2004. A revised EA was issued on June 10, with a deadline for comment of July 16. The EA addressed three different potential FWP actions:

- 1) No Action
- 2) Proposed Action Alternative
- 3) High-Level Protection Alternative.

Public comments will be considered in finalizing the EA and state plan. With approval by the FWP Commission, the FWP Director will make a decision and release a written Record of Decision. The decision may be the adoption of one of the alternatives or a modification of one or more of the alternatives and will be based on:

- the efficacy of the proposed actions to achieve sage grouse conservation goals
- environmental impacts
- public comments.

Upon approval from the FWP Commission, the Final Plan will be signed by the FWP Director and then routed to other contributing partners for signature.

The overall goal of the state plan

The long-term conservation and enhancement of the sagebrush steppe/mixed-grass prairie complex within Montana in a manner that supports sage grouse and a healthy diversity and abundance of wildlife species and human uses.

Objectives of the plan include:

- Maintaining the distribution and integrity of sagebrush steppe communities
- Maintaining the distribution of sage grouse populations within sagebrush ecotypes

